



## Clement of Alexandria Albert Stöckl

Clement was born about the middle of the second century, at Alexandria, as some maintain — at Athens, as it is asserted by others. Gifted with extraordinary powers of intellect, he applied himself to the study of the various systems of Greek philosophy, and acquired in the study a knowledge which was at once comprehensive and profound. Under the influence of divine grace he became a Christian. But the character of his labours did not change with his conversion. His aim was to acquire a profounder knowledge of truth, and his ambition to lead others to share his knowledge. After many wanderings he settled at Alexandria, became a member of the Catechetical School, and after the death of its president, Pantaenus, succeeded to his office. In this capacity he laboured with unceasing energy in the cause of science and education. When the persecution of Septimus Severus began (A.D. 202), he retired to Cappadocia. It is not known whether he again returned to Alexandria. He died A.D. 217.

The writings of Clement which have come down to us, are: (a) The *Cohortatio ad Gentes*, in which he cites the extravagances and improprieties of the heathen mythology and mysteries as arguments against paganism, and exhorts all to come to Christ. (b) The *Paedagogus*, an exposition of the moral law of the Christian system. (c) The *Stromata*, in eight books, scientific studies of Christian truth and discussions on the Christian Gnosis, not arranged in any systematic order (as Clement himself declares, and as the title of the work, which implies its resemblance to a variegated carpet, signifies), but expressed in the form of aphorisms; and lastly (d) A treatise under the title *Quis Dives Salveter*, with fragmentary remains of other works.

With regard to the position providentially assigned to Greek philosophy, as preparatory to Christianity, Clement is at one with Justin. He draws a distinction between the sum of truth that philosophy contains and its errors. The former he attributes to the Divine Logos, as its ultimate source, the latter he ascribes to man. In a twofold sense the Divine Logos is, for him, the author of the truth contained in Greek philosophy, In the first place, he maintains, the Greek philosophers learnt from the Jews, and were then so far wanting in honesty as to claim as their own discovery what the Jews had taught them, and what they had themselves only falsified and perverted. In the second place, he appeals to the saying of Sacred Scripture that the Divine Logos has enlightened all men, and he holds that the Greek philosophers were themselves led to the discovery of certain truths in virtue of the germs of the Divine Logos implanted in the faculty of reason.

From this point of view, Greek philosophy — so far as its sum of truth is concerned, appears to Clement to be a gift of God, bestowed through the Logos; as Revelation was given through Moses and the Prophets, and designed, like Revelation, to prepare the way for Christ. It was given to the heathens to lead them to righteousness, and hence, they who, in pre-christian times, lived according to the law of reason, were justified before God, inasmuch as their lives were in accord with the laws of the Divine Logos revealed in their own reason. The heathen philosophers had, however, but a partial knowledge of the truth, the fulness of truth was revealed for the first time in Christ. Plato is the most excellent of the Greek philosophers; in the system of the others there are seeds of truth, but the difficulty is to find these out and separate them from the errors.

This estimate of the essential character of the Greek philosophy leads up to Clement's theory regarding the Christian Gnosis. In his view, faith in the Christian teaching, as maintained in the Church, is the starting point and the basis of the Christian Gnosis. Whoever abandons ecclesiastical traditions, ceases, by the fact, to be of God. Faith, then, in its relation to the Christian Gnosis holds a position analogous to that of the *prolēpsis* of the Stoics. According to these philosophers the *prolēpsis* is a condition pre-requisite to the *epistēme* such too is the relation of faith to the Gnosis. Faith is a *prolēpsis ekousios*, a free assent to the unseen; without which a Gnosis is impossible (*Strom.* II., 2, 4, 5).

The mere *pistis* (faith) is not *gnōsis*. The Christian Gnostic in comparison with him who believes, without deeper knowledge, is what the man is compared with the child. To advance from *pistis* to *gnōsis* the aid of philosophy is necessary. Philosophy alone can help us to pass from mere belief to profounder speculative knowledge. The man who seeks to reach the Gnosis without philosophy, dialectic, and the study of nature, is like the man who would gather grapes without rearing the vine. (*Strom.* I., 9.) Philosophy is essentially a gift of the Divine Logos; the character of a means to the attainment of the Christian Gnosis can and must be accorded to it; in a right view of Christianity it cannot be set aside.

Philosophy is, however, only a theoretical requirement of the Christian Gnosis; there is a practical requirement also. The man who passes from Faith to Gnosis must repent of his sins, and enter upon the path of moral improvement. He must fight against the desires and appetites of his own heart, and overcome them effectually. He must strive to cultivate in himself all kinds of virtue, and put forth every energy to attain personal sanctity. It is only where this previous purification and perfection of self has been accomplished, that philosophic effort, based upon Faith, can lead to the Gnosis.

With regard to the Gnosis itself, it essentially includes two factors. The first concerns the intelligence, In the Gnosis, the Gnostic attains to the understanding of that which before had been obscure and unintelligible. He has knowledge of everything that is, that has been, and that will be, in their ultimate causes. Christian truth stands clear and luminous before his eyes. The second factor concerns the will. It is the perfection of love. Knowledge without love is nothing; in love knowledge attains its final perfection. Love must therefore be united with knowledge, if the Gnosis is perfect. And since love in its turn, is nothing without the good works in which it reveals itself, it follows that good works must attend upon the Gnosis as the shadow upon the body. (*Strom.* VII., 10, 12.)

This doctrine of the Christian Gnosis furnishes Clement with the outlines of that picture of the Christian Gnostic which he presents as the ideal of Christian perfection. In setting up this ideal he is imitating the Stoics, substituting his "Christian Gnostic" for their "Sage." We even find the fundamental outlines of the "Stoic Sage" reproduced in the "Christian Gnostic." The chief characteristic of the Christian Gnostic is, as in the Stoic ideal, the *apatheia* or complete absence from the soul of all affections and excitements of passion (*pathē*), and the tranquillity of mind thence resulting in every situation and vicissitude of life.

The following is the description of the Christian Gnostic presented to us by Clement: The Gnostic is united in perfect and immediate love with Infinite Beauty, and beyond this he desires nothing. He does not do good from fear of any punishment, nor from hope of any reward, but merely for God's sake, and for sake of the good done. Even if he were assured that he would not be punished for evil deeds, he would not perform such actions, and this for the sole reason that they are against right reason, that they are evil. He is not mastered by any inclination or any appetite; only those appetites are admitted in his nature which are indispensable for the support of bodily life, and they are satisfied only so far as the support of life requires. Affections and passions do not disturb his lofty calm of mind; to such influences

he is inaccessible. This *apatheia* of the Gnostic raises him to a certain divine condition, for in it he attains to likeness with God who is essentially *apathês*. In this state his works are wholly perfect (*katorthômata*), for they are performed purely for righteousness' sake.

It will be seen that Clement makes very exorbitant demands on the Christian Gnostic. The ideal "Stoic Sage" is not in keeping with the nature of man as it exists: the same may perhaps be said of the ideal set up by Clement. He makes practically the same demands upon the "Gnostic" that the Stoics made upon the "Sage." He does not, indeed, impose it as a duty upon every Christian to attain to this height of perfection, he restricts this obligation to the chosen few, but it is somewhat ominous to find him characterising the knowledge reached in the Gnosis as a kind of *hidden lore*, which has come down by oral tradition from the Apostles (*Strom.* L. 6. c. 7, p. 246. Edit., Oberthür). At this point, Clement, it is clear, yields too much to the false theory of the Gnosis.

According to Clement, God, in his proper being, is incomprehensible to human understanding. We do not so much understand what He is, as what He is not. We call Him the Good, the One, the Existent, or Spirit, God, Father, Lord, but these terms do not express what He is in Himself. We use these excellent names merely that the understanding may have whereon to support itself in its contemplation of the Divinity. God is infinitely exalted above all things created; they have all their being from Him, for they are the work of His infinite goodness, but their being is not the same as His being, they are merely created by Him.

There exists a "Sacred Trias" of which the Father is the first member, the Son the second, and the Holy Ghost the third (*Strom.* L.v., c. 14, p. 255). There is a Father of all things, says Clement, a Logos of all things, and a Holy Ghost, the same everywhere (*Paedagog.* L. c. 6, p. 4.5, Ed. Oxon.) The Father is Being, unqualifiable, incomprehensible, and ineffable; the Son is Wisdom, Knowledge, Truth, and all that is akin to these attributes. To Him predicates may be attributed, and to Him positive attributes assigned; all the powers of the spiritual brought together in unity are concentrated in the Son. The Son is not the same unity (as the Father), nor one with the same oneness of being as the Father, but yet He is not many, divided by difference and contrast; He is the All-one, from whom all things come. In Him, as in a common centre all perfections meet, whence he is styled the Alpha and Omega of all things (*Strom.*, L. iv., c. 25, p. 230). Finally, the Holy Ghost is the light of truth, the true light without shadow or obscurity, the Spirit of the Lord, which, without division in Itself bestows Itself on all who are sanctified by truth (*Ib.* L. vi., c. 16).

It has been asserted that in his teaching on the subject of the Divine Logos, Clement displayed something of the hesitation of Philo as to whether he should assign the Logos a subordinate position or give Him merely a modal existence, In the first place, Clement most decidedly does not favour the notion of modal existence, for the Son of God is, in his teaching, always a personal being. He is our instructor, says Clement, the Holy God, Jesus, the Logos, the leader of the human kind, the merciful, lovable, but just God. (*Paed.* L. vii., p. 48, 2, 8, p. 79). "We offer praise and thanksgiving," he says again (*Paed.* L. iii., p. 14), "to the Father and Son, to the Son and the Father, to the Son as to our Instructor and Master, and to the Holy Ghost; to the one God in whom are all things, in whom all things are one, and through whom eternity exists." Here we have Father, Son and Holy Ghost set on the same level of perfection; as, therefore, the Father is a Person, so also must it be with the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Clement must also be absolved from the charge of assigning to the Son a subordinate position. He attributes to the Son not only the same eternity as the Father, but he further asserts with special emphasis the oneness of essence in Father and Son, a doctrine with which the theory of subordination is wholly incompatible. God, says Clement, does not hate anything, neither does His Logos, for both are One — God. Moreover, Clement expressly teaches the

equality of the Son with the Father, for he asserts that the Divine Logos, as true God, is in every respect equal to the Lord of all things, and we are therefore bound to love Him equally with the Father (*Quis Div Salv.*, c. 29). When, therefore, Clement describes the Son as a nature “which stands next in order to the One Supreme Ruler” (*Strom.* vii., c. 2, p. 298), we must, in order to save him from self-contradiction, understand him to speak of a subordination, not of the substantial, but of an hypostatical or personal kind.

The Logos is, then, an image of the Father, equal in all respects to the Father, and He is, moreover, the archetype of the universe. In Him are all ideas united. But not only is He the archetype of creation, He is furthermore its efficient cause, inasmuch as the Father has created the world through Him. It is the nature of God to do good, He has, therefore, created the world by means of the Logos, in order to display His goodness in it. In the world we have an immediate manifestation of the Logos, through the Logos we attain to the knowledge of the Father. Everything created is good, evil is not a substantial entity, it has its source only in the misuse of human liberty.

According to Clement, the human soul is an incorporeal, simple, and invisible substance. He distinguishes, however, after the fashion of the Stoics two parts in the soul — the *hêgemonikon meros* — reason, and the *alolon meros*, which he also styles *pneuma sarkikon* or *psuchê sarkikê*. The *hêgemonikon meros* comprehends intelligence and will, and to it nature has assigned dominion over the faculties of sense, inasmuch as the functions of the latter are dependent upon the will, and must be brought into subjection to it under the guidance of reason. The divine law may be divided according to its reference to the different parts of the soul; the laws of the Second Table concern the *pneuma sarkikon*, those of the First Table the *hêgemonikon*.

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Albert Stöckl. *Handbook of the History of Philosophy. (Part 1: Pre-Scholastic Philosophy)*. Trans. T.A. Finlay. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1887.

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